

LSA Book Review

Thorpe, H. (2011) *Snowboarding Bodies in Theory and Practice*, Basingstoke, UK/New York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-0-230579446, Hbk, pp. 313, £55.00.

Reviewer:

Ashley Hardwell,

Senior Lecturer Outdoor and Adventurous Activities

**229, Fairfax Hall,
Headingley Campus,
Leeds Metropolitan University,
Churchwood Avenue,
Leeds,
LS6 3QH.**

E-mail: a.g.hardwell@leedsmet.ac.uk

Snowboarding Bodies in Theory and Practice is Holly Thorpe's single authored contribution to the Palgrave Macmillan Global Culture and Sport Series edited by Stephen Wagg (Leeds Metropolitan University, UK) and David Andrews (University of Maryland, USA). There is no other text that explores and reveals the complex nature of snowboarding culture in such depth. It must therefore be seen as a cutting edge offering, not just in snowboarding subculture but embodied theorising through multi modes of data generation and multi disciplinary social theorising. The book stays true to its title throughout. Holly skilfully uses a broad range of theories to negotiate the multi-faceted nature of snowboarding from "grommets, Bro's and Old guys" (Thorpe 2011: 172) to the importance of gender and place identity. Holly does not provide in-depth understanding of sociological and socio-cultural theory but instead is a master of focusing on specific snowboarding cultural phenomena and using theory to ensure its in-depth understanding. The strength of this book lies in the nuanced explanations provided by chosen and applied theories that "paint a fuller more complete picture of snowboarding bodies than could have been achieved by focusing on one theory" (Thorpe 2011: 13).

A rival to the array of commensurate applied theories selected from a range of the socio-cultural theoretical perspectives often challenging accepted taxonomies and lenses is the length and breadth of the study undertaken. Through her status as a well respected snowboarder Holly has been able to access an extensive range of sources including fieldwork, interviews and sensual ethnographies spanning six countries over a seven year period. This mass of data is carefully scrutinised and theory brought to life through constant reference to the real world of snowboarding. Despite being a professional and core snowboarding participant Holly has been able to take a very big step away from its centre and provide incredible insight into her life shaping activity. This requires bravery and talent as her life defining activity comes under the microscope.

Each chapter deals with a carefully chosen theoretical lens brought to bear on the cultural snowboarding body being investigated. Chapters are always grounded from the outset in the real

world of snowboarding through the voice of snowboarders. The short history of snowboarding is questioned and critiqued through a multiplicity of viewpoints. In early sections women are conspicuous by their absence, a further reiteration of male global sport domination in just about all sports, not just the mainstream. Indeed, more time could have been spent on 'the selling' of female representations in snowboarding culture. What was intriguing from a feminist perspective was the difficulty in recognising women's "capital accumulating strategies" (Lovell's 2000 in Thorpe 2011: 149) against the use of women by others as the bearers of capital. There are many other well developed thought provoking sections like this allowing the reader to really think outside the box. For example, Holly's lengthy excursion into snowboarding geographies and "transnational mobilities" (Thorpe 2011: 195) is fascinating. This section is an excellent example of the way in which her embodied experience of the nomadic snowboarding lifestyles and her many geographies allows in-depth insight and understanding of the experience of other snow boarders only available to the authentic insider. Wheaton and Beal's (2003) concept of core and authentic experiences is also well developed. The snowboarding subcultural make up of professionals, core participants, weekend warriors and posers is described as highly fragmented. Yet "established groups and marginal outsiders" (ibid: 151) must have commonalities of interest all functioning under what may be seen as a "pre-formed" system (Luhmann 1996: 60). Perhaps snowboarding could be described as differentiated in that space is successfully shared between various participants all engaged in a "pre-formed" practice. While I found the fragmentation concept problematic this is a new sport without the history and traditions of many other activities and this could well accentuate the reasons for Holly's use of the term fragmented.

Holly draws upon contemporary theory from Urry (2007) later in the book, again showing the breadth of perspectives developed. The concept of the "sociology of mobilities" (Urry 2007: 185) is applied at many different levels and therefore provides an excellent example of how she is able to develop and apply theory throughout this book using a multi-layered approach to explore not just snowboarding, but her own "fluid and malleable" writing style (Urry 2000: 186). She begins this section by using the sociology of mobilities to academically underpin the descriptive nature of the "various corporeal mobilities in snowboarding culture" (Thorpe 2011: 195). Urry's (2000: 186) cry for "greater academic mobility across disciplinary borders" (in Thorpe 2011: 195) is in fact a feature of her whole book, though particularly strong and accentuated in this section.

In developing a critical historical perspective useful case study material appears further confirming this books broader appeal. While students of cultural studies will revel in its pages there are also little gems hidden in chapters that will appeal to students of sports studies more generally; perhaps even Sport Business. For example, the Burton's case study (p. 48 - 56) is well developed and helps, in part, to critique the Marxist perspective developed within this chapter as less savoury lifestyles of some successful boarders are revealed and the thin media veneer of the rich and famous exposed. Because sections are developed using different theoretical perspectives it is a book easily picked up and put down. Indeed, I preferred reading it this way to allow time to consider these different perspectives and develop personal thoughts and views. Such an approach may appeal more to undergraduate students with the applied nature of the theory serving as an excellent example of praxis. Postgraduate students may also take the thought provoking nature of each section and carefully consider how the applied nature of the theories used develop critical understanding of particular cultural phenomena. Readership will not be restricted to academics. Anyone ensconced in snowboarding and its culture would enjoy this journey through embodied snowboarding experiences and its closeness to practice with every theoretical perspective strongly linked to the real world of snowboarding. They would

emerge feeling they know their chosen sport more intimately; particularly women as the writing has a distinctly feminist flavour.

It is difficult to comprehend that so many differing perspectives, disciplines, concepts and thought provoking ideas can be crammed into 275 pages. I have spent time re-reading sections and like any excellent piece of writing the more it is revisited the more emerges from the text. It is a champion for qualitative research in the field and the importance of reflexivity in all we do. It shows the importance of “the theorist always being embodied in the research” (Thorpe 2011: 267). Holly’s message towards the end of her book in the reflective section on ‘lessons from the field’ calls for far more in-depth probing of “contemporary youth-dominated physical cultures [that are] complex, multi-dimensional and in a constant state of change and flux” (Thorpe 2011: 263). “Rather than physically distancing ourselves through the research we conduct we should embrace the squirm that embodied theorizing has the potential to produce” (Thorpe 2011: 267). This book joins the large body of excellent qualitative work in the field of sport subculture, its complexities and how they can be scrutinised and revealed through theory. Its quality and breadth of theory together with its skilful application will ensure its worthy place on the reading lists of cultural studies students for many year to come.

Luhmann, N. (1996) Complexity, Structural Contingencies and Value Conflicts in *Detraditionalization*, P. Heelas, S. Lash and P. Morris (eds), Oxford: Blackwell, pp.59-71.

Thorpe, H. (2011) *Snowboarding Bodies in Theory and Practice*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Urry, J. (2007) *Mobilities*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Urry, J. (2000) Mobile Sociology, *British Journal of Sociology*, 51, (1), pp. 185 – 203.

Wheaton, B. and Beal, B. (2003) ‘Keeping it Real’: Sub-cultural media and discourses of authenticity in alternative sport, *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*, 38, pp. 155 – 176.